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Somebody Has to Pay Rent: The Critical Autoethnography of a Low Income Student

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Cover Page: What Changes I Made

I only changed the recommended corrections provided to me by the editors, which included replacing the abstract text in the PDF with the text used for my submission and minor typos.

Somebody Has to Pay Rent:

The Critical Autoethnography of a Low Income Student

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Abstract

Conducted through the qualitative research method of autoethnography, and presented through the lens of critical analysis, this study explores the oppressive experience as a low income student in an institute of higher education. Written as an attempt to make the struggle as a low income students more visible, the focus of this study is both an exploration into the commodification of higher education and the culture surrounding how we treat, or don't acknowledge, low income students.

Through the presentation of the author's experience as an autoethnography, the insight gained from first hand experience can be shared through an accessible, but still academic, medium. By reflecting on this experience using the critical paradigm, the oppressive nature a low income student has with their institute of higher learning is revealed, explored, and critiqued.

The results of this study have shown that while some institutes of higher education may be skillful in attracting low income students, they are not necessarily equipped to serve low income students. Even more troubling, on an interpersonal level its entirely possible that those who serve the institute may not even be aware enough to recognize, considerate enough to care, or empathetic towards understanding low income students.

Keywords: autoethnography, class, education, low income students, critical theory

Author's Biography

Shelbi Schadendorf graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato in May 2018 with her Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies and Marketing. During her time at her university she studied abroad in Scotland and South Korea at the University of Stirling and the University of Seoul, respectively. Her areas of interest in academic and research pursuits include international relations, immigration, class, and gender.

Post graduation, Shelbi will be serving as an English professor in the Republic of China through the Peace Corps.

Somebody Has to Pay Rent:

The Critical Autoethnography of a Low Income Student

I wanted to go to college in the big city. After I looked at the annual cost of tuition alone, I never even applied. This was how my next stage of life was chosen for me: I researched price, compared it against the scholarships I would receive if I went, and ultimately went to the public university that offered me largest lump sum in comparison to their total price. My relationship with higher education from the very beginning has always come down to money; where I went, the majors I chose, how I lived, what classes I picked out. Could I still work 40 hours on this class schedule? If the textbook is only used for a few assignments, can I afford to let my grade suffer but avoid the charge it would create on my credit card? If they took away my in-state tuition scholarship, would I just have to quit school?

My family has always reassured me that my education is an investment. Though I may spend money I don't have now, I'll get it back in time in the form of better paying opportunities. No doubt, nearly every student that has walked my campus has heard this line in some form or another. Universities prey on this notion- that education is the quickest, most successful way to improve your quality of life. Business students in particular have been known to attribute the value of their education directly to a belief that said education will result in future employment opportunities (Taylor, Hunter, Melton, & Goodwin, 2011). Perhaps none believe this notion more strongly than those looking to find class mobility through education.

Though perpetuating a message that their services will improve life is not intrinsically immoral, the predatory nature with which many high dollar institutions target low income families and students is incredibly damaging. Even institutions with so-called, "low cost" tuition

rates often abandon those virtues the moment a low income student is enticed through the door. On average only 36 percent of a public four year university in-state student's total budget is even used towards those tuition and fees (Berg, 2010). I certainly experienced this at my own, "low-cost" university, and spent the majority of my years in a program where my status as a low-income student was proven over and over again to be uncared or unconcerned for.

Through a critical autoethnography, a form of research which, "...describes or analyzes personal experiences to better understand a cultural event," (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015, p. 137) I hope to describe and analyze my own experience as a low income student in an institution founded on the contradiction between the public good of education and the commodity education has become. The critical method is appropriate for the topic, as my experience was entirely controlled by the power in which my university held over me, and the oppressive nature I found many of my classrooms to exhibit towards low-income students. In regards to the autoethnographic nature of this research, I found the lack of visibility of low-income student experiences one of the very things that made my situation so much worse. After all, in 2012, only 51% of low income high school graduates even went on to a 2 or 4 year university (compared to 81% of their high income counterparts) (Pew Research Center, 2014). For this reason, I find the sharing of my own experience to be a powerful aid towards those who find themselves in similar economic situations, or the situation to help low-income students.

In short, critical theory is a theoretical paradigm entrenched in the study of power. In particular critical theory is often used as a lense to examine the abuse of power, or the symbiotic relationship between oppression and power. The purpose of this is most often to shine light on cultural instances of imbalanced power, and whose noblest ambition would be to hope in doing

so change these injustices. Critical theory is meant to critique reality, point to the flaws, relate them back to the concept of power, and then provide evidence that the power is misplaced and misused in order to enact change. It's a theory used often in discussions of concepts involving social and cultural identity- such as gender, race, and of course, class (Dimock & Cole, 2016).

One approach to critical theory that heavily focuses on class is the use of Marxist theory as a critical lense. Perhaps the most prevalent and studied class-based theoretical approach to the world, Marxism is only one of many ways to interpret critical theory. While Marxism will not be the sole version of critical theory used in this research, many of its theories are particularly important to understanding class in a critical way. One such principle is the concept that the general public consciousness is shaped by many institutions such as religious, social, or political entities. From a Marxist perspective, "...each of these institutions/networks provides information to the public that is in some way filtered or controlled to favor a particular worldview favored by the state or controlling bourgeoisie (Croucher, 2016, p. 42)." Essentially asserting that our world is designed to keep the wealthy powerful, and the lower classes oppressed (Croucher, 2016).

Autoethnography is a form of research that places high value in personal experience. Many describe it as a method which combines the characteristics of an autobiography and an ethnography. In an autobiography, an author retells their past experiences, in particular those which they have found to be of great impact on their life. In an ethnography, a researcher studies a culture by becoming participants or observers in said culture (Goodall, 2001).

Autoethnographies use the personal reflection of an autobiographer and the submersive cultural research of an ethnographer to form analytical, descriptive research on a lived experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010).

Literature Review

I am researching the experience of low-income students in an institute of higher learning, in the hopes of extrapolating on oppression and identity through a critique of my own experiences. For this research, a background on class, both as a general concept and its role in communication, and higher education's place in society plus its relationship with capitalism, are important to understand. At this intersection between class and education we find the last piece of necessary knowledge, a background on the low income student.

Class

Class as a socioeconomic concept is broadly studied, and as such has been defined in a multitude of ways. In this research, I will be using the definition of class as, "...one's position in the economic hierarchy in society that arises from a combination of annual income, educational attainment, and occupation prestige" (Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017, p. 423). Beyond this however, I will be referring to the social aspect of class, the behavioral and cultural parts of class that can only be identified in a more qualitative regard. There is a particular importance to these aspects of class, and the concept of social class signals, "...behaviors that provide information about a person's income, educational attainment, or occupation status (Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017, p. 422)." The way class reveals itself in this way is just as large a dilemma in how class affects day-to-day life as the actual dollar amount in one's bank account.

No theoretical framework has as deep and entwined of a history on class as Marxism. A modern expert in class and class research, sociologist Erik Olin Wright has said of Marxism, "Whatever one might think of its scientific adequacy, classical Marxism is an ambitious and elegant theoretical project in which class analysis provides a central part of the explanation of

what can be termed the epochal trajectory of human history (Wright, 2000, p. 1).” This tenant of Marxism, that class is directly linked to all struggle and facets of progress (or the lack thereof), is critical to understanding the ramifications class has on all of us.

Class and communication. Class and communication are related in two ways, first, how we communicate class, and second, how class affects our communication. Researchers Kraus, Park, and Tan (2017) assert that how we communicate class can be divided into three basic categories, two nonverbal and one verbal; body, culture, and voice. The first of these three categories, body, is comprised of kinesic behavior and physical appearance. The second, culture, includes sartorial choices, leisure activities, and preferences. The third, voice, consists of both linguistic and paralinguistic cues, plus word choice. These three categories are also known as class signaling or social class signals.

Out of these signs of social class, or how we communicate class, comes how class affects our communication. In the communication of class, often there is the creation of group boundaries, in the form of sorting, stereotyping, and class conflict. Group boundaries then lead to the ultimate aggregator of social economic inequality; dehumanization, strategic sharing, and the justification of classist ideology (Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017). It truly becomes a vicious cycle, we communicate our class through our behaviors, those forms of communication separate us, we continue to have even more separate and unique behaviors based on our class, and these separate us further.

Despite the very serious effect class has on how we communicate, far less has been researched or written about on class than its close social identity relatives, like race or gender. This is especially true in a sociological or qualitative context in academia (Fiske & Markus,

2012). This in and of itself offers us insight as to how we view and think about class. Unlike identify factors like race or gender (both characteristics of personhood that are recognized as important in nearly all legal, political, or official capacities within the United States), class status is not considered salient. While true that class status can be much harder to recognize than the physical characteristics that race and gender can often provide us, as the previous section on class signaling asserts, class nevertheless finds ways to permeate our everyday lives through even our most basic communication.

Higher Education

Education has long been viewed as the ultimate ladder for economic mobility in the United States. This mobility, and the affiliated notion that through hard work anything is possible, could be considered by many the very definition of the notorious, “American Dream” that has been so pervasive in our country’s narrative. In recent decades, this promise of mobility has shifted from education generally to postsecondary education specifically. Higher education has, at least in the public mind, become a necessary prerequisite to financial stability.

The following are some basic statistics on education in the United States. From 2005 to 2015, there was a 14 percent increase in enrollment for degree-granting postsecondary institutions (raising the total number of enrollment from 17.5 million students in 2005 to 20 million in 2015) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The 6 year-graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students seeking a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution between fall 2009 and 2015 was 59%. This is to say that 59% of all students who began a bachelor’s degree in 2009 from a 4 year institution, graduated with a bachelor’s degree from the same institution by 2015. However, that 6 year graduation rate was 59% for public

institutions, 66% for private nonprofit institutions, and 23% for private for profit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In 2014-2015, the average cost of attendance for a single year at a postsecondary institution (which includes total tuition, fees, room and board rates charged for full-time undergraduate students) was \$21,728. This same cost of attendance averaged \$16,188 at public institutions, \$41,970 at private nonprofit institutions, and \$23,372 at private for-profit institutions. After adjusting for inflation, the average increase in this cost of attendance between the 2004-2005 school year and the 2014-2015 school year rose 33% at public institutions, 26% at private nonprofit institutions, and decreased 18% at private for-profit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The commodification of education. Education has, traditionally, been viewed as a type of public good. Something that is widely available, and free for citizens to utilize. In living memory however, higher education has turned into a booming business. Judson and Taylor (2014) lament that there is a, “...diminishing view of higher education as a public good (i.e., a shared resource and responsibility) as opposed to the view of higher education as an (individually purchased) private commodity” (p. 52). In today’s society, 72% of U.S. adults believe that individuals should bear, “a lot” of the responsibility for having the right skills and education for success in the economy. Only 52% of U.S. adults believe this responsibility should fall on colleges and universities, and even fewer believe it should fall on employers (49%) or the state or federal government (40% and 35%, respectively) (Pew Research Center, 2016). This data would support the claim that today’s public simply does not regard higher education as a shared responsibility.

Universities and capitalism. The concept of education as a paid-for good is, obviously, a capitalist one. The relationship all education has, but particularly higher education, with capitalism (both in its place within a capitalist society, and the way we educate about capitalism) is a complex and sordid beast. Bill Bigelow, curriculum editor of the nonprofit public education reform organization Rethinking Schools, reflects on this relationship in a 2012 interview,

[Capitalism is]... the economic system that so many of us take for granted; it's everywhere and nowhere- the context within we live our lives, and yet invisible. So much of the official school curriculum teaches students to not-think. And the curriculum especially teaches students to not-think about capitalism. Obviously, it's totally off-limits to question capitalism, but really the idea is to teach kids to ignore it. Isn't it a "basic skill" to be able to think clearly about the nature of the economic system that shapes how we produce and distribute goods, how we organize work, how we allocate wealth, how we appropriate nature? As I mentioned earlier, it seems especially important for students to think critically about capitalism because capitalism privatizes the rewards but socializes its ecological impact. (Bigelow & Sanchez, 2012)

This notion of privatized reward but sociological impacts is a reoccurring theme for many scholars who believe in a socialist reform of education.

Goals of education. The very nature of a public resource is to provide benefits to the entire public. So is it true of the purpose of public education. However, as American society turned from a collectivistic culture to a highly individualistic one, the responsibility of children's upbringing too transformed from that of the village to that of each individual family. This has reflected itself in elementary and secondary public education, with a family's tendency to only

take interest in the education of their own child. This creates a paradox that education must simultaneously be a public service and cater private gains or reward individually to each child. This paradox, and the tension and issues it creates, doesn't stop at early education. It continues into higher education, exasperated by the fact that students pay individually for their education but receive a service divided among many, many others (Grubb & Lazerson, 1982; Berg, 2010). Scholars such as Grubb and Lazerson (1982) point out that so long as the motives for education remain individualistic, the outcome will persistently be distorted.

Low Income Students

“Statistically, the least academically qualified students from wealthy families have as much chance of going to college as the highest performing kids from lower-class (Berg, 2010, pp. xi).”

At the crossroads of the past two sections, class and education, stand the students most affected by these two components of our society, low income students. General statistics on low income students are hard to come by, and statistics relevant in their recency are even more rare. However, the U.S. Department of Education define Pell Grant recipients as low income, and has a more plentiful database on these students. The U.S. Department of Education explains Pell Grants as the following:

Student eligibility for the Pell Grant Program (and other federal aid programs) is determined via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), from which each applicant's Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated. To determine the amount of federal aid a student is eligible to receive, the EFC formula takes into account a family's taxed and untaxed income, assets, and benefits as well as other factors (such as

family size and the number of family members attending college during the same academic year). If a student's EFC is lower than the student's total price of attendance (i.e., tuition and fees, books and supplies, and living expenses), the student may be eligible for need-based federal financial aid, including a Pell Grant. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015)

Using the Pell Grant as a means to classify low income students opens up the definition of low income to those who may not fit the label in a broad economic sense, but may possibly feel the effects in their sociocultural environment. For example, it is possible for a student in the top 50% of family income to receive a Pell Grant- but only if the cost of their school is so exorbitant that their family income does not cover the entirety of its cost. While certainly not low income in a strict economic sense, these students may quite possibly be in an institution where their economic status is far lower than their peers. This would result in the potential for similar class discrimination that their more traditionally defined low income counterparts would face.

That being said, it is a slippery slope to lump in those who face true economic hardships with rich individuals who just have super rich friends, and call them both disadvantaged. This means of classification also results in a little less than half of all undergraduate students being considered low income. Compare that to a study of 1995-1996 that defined low income as those whose family income was below 125 percent of the federally established poverty level for their family size, and found only 26 percent of all undergraduates could be classified as low income (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Pell grant recipient demographics. With that disclaimer out of the way, Table 1 outlines statistics on Pell Grant recipients (and by association, low income students) from 2011

to 2012. Please note that in the 2011-2012 school year 9,444,368 students were identified as Pell Grant recipients (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Since estimates of total student enrollment in all post secondary institutions in this time frame waver around 20 million, we can estimate that a little less than half of all students in the 2011-2012 school year are Pell Grant recipients (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Table 1:

Demographics of Pell Grant Recipients/Low Income Students

Selected Characteristics	Percent with Pell Grant
Age	
23 or younger	37.8
24-29	48.9
30 or older	43.5
Sex	
Male	36.5
Female	44.8
Race/Ethnicity	
White	33.5
Black	61.9
Hispanic (excluding Puerto Rico)	50.0
Asian / Pacific Islander	33.8
American Indian	54.0
Other or two or more races	45.2
Dependent student family income ¹	
Lowest 25 percent	79.4
Lower middle 25 percent	53.3
Upper middle 25 percent	5.5
Highest 25 percent	0.4
Independent student family income ²	
Lowest 25 percent	65.9
Lower middle 25 percent	65.8
Upper middle 25 percent	40.5
Highest 25 percent	17.9

¹ For dependent students, consists of parents' income² For independent students, consists of the income of the student (and spouse if the student is married).

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Note: Adapted from: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

(2015) *Trends in Pell Grant Receipt and the Characteristics of Pell GRant Recipients: Selected Years, 1999-2000 to 2011-12*, (NCES 2015-601).

Methods

The method in which I will be conducting my research will be critical autoethnography. In this section I will explore both autoethnography and critical theory as independent forms of research and analyzation, then outline how I will utilize them for my own purposes.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a rebel child of research methods, rejecting the typical quantitative preference for knowledge and instead regarding research as, “a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 1).” Often described as a combination of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography is at once both artful and informational.

On its autobiographical side, autoethnographies hope to capture truthful past experiences actually lived by the author. These experiences are typically significantly important to the author’s life or identity, and have proven to be transformative for the author in some way. They are not typically written as a form of research, but instead to be enjoyed, reflected upon, and admired. Autobiographies are also incredibly dependent on how skillfully they are written. They employ the use of colorful language, aesthetic writing style, and engaging to readers (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010).

What makes an autoethnography different from an autobiography however, is the ethnographic context it is examined in. Ethnography, whose origin lies in cultural anthropology, is, “...the study of, writing about, and or a description of (graphy), people or folk (ethno) (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015, p. 134).” When conducting ethnographic research, it is necessary to become a participant observer. Participant observers actually engage in the culture they are studying, and record data about the culture around them and their role in it. The purpose

of ethnographic research is to better understand a culture for the benefit of both insiders and outsiders of the culture (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010).

The process of writing an autoethnography typically starts with a researcher pinpointing, “...patterns of cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 3).” Obviously since this is an autoethnography these cultural experiences must be something that has personally impacted the researcher’s life. Autoethnographies also take into account the cultural events and setting relevant to the experience being described, and reflect on their place within those bounds. Along with relating their story to a bigger picture, a key part of autoethnographies is the integration of theory into the storytelling in order to analyze and learn from a cultural experience (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

Critical Theory

The main theory I will be integrating into my own autoethnography will be critical theory. The use of critical theory to analyze culture is also known as a critical cultural critique, and typically focuses on issues related to oppression and power. The purpose of applying critical theory to any subject is to first, identify a issue to critique, discuss why it is an issue, and ultimately aim for, “...improving the condition of humankind (Dimock & Cole, 2016, p. 297).”

While there are many different versions of critical theory, when discussing class many critical theorists turn towards Marxist theory as a lense with which to criticize. I will take from various theories within the critical paradigm for my research, but since my experience focuses on class power dynamics, Marxist theory will be particularly applicable. In particular, Marxist theory asserts that those in society who hold the money and power (bourgeois) will always act in

their best interest to keep themselves in that position. In doing so, they oppress marginalized members of society that do not have much money or power (proletariat) (Dimock & Cole, 2016).

In her critical autoethnographic discussion of class and academia, Robin Redmon Wright (2016) points out the irony of using critical theory, a paradigm often used to discuss the oppression of the working class, in contexts so often entirely inaccessible to the working class, such as academic papers. She points out that autoethnography is much more accessible to the working class, and incorporating critical theory into it therefore makes much more sense. As my autoethnography is on a similar topic, I too find the appropriateness in writing about class in an easily digestible form.

At the time of writing this autoethnography, I have been and am still currently experiencing the cultural phenomenon I will describe and analyze. I will only describe my past experiences as a low income university student, occurring between my freshman year of college until the first semester of my senior year. This is in order to provide a more concise story, given that I've had more time to reflect on my past experiences. The recurring negative experiences I have had as a low-income student in my chosen field of study is the pattern of cultural experience I have observed, and I will be taking into account the cultural context surrounding the nature of higher education and the pursuit of education by low-income individuals. In doing this, I will also analyze my experiences through critical theory, and identify where the power dynamics in my own academic life were abused, and how my academic program oppresses those from lower class backgrounds. In doing so, as is the point of critical theory, I hope to improve the conditions that other students from a similar socioeconomic background may face.

The Autoethnography

From 2014-2018 I attended a public state university where I graduated with a B.S. in both Marketing and Communication Studies. All four years of school I was considered a low income student, and Pell Grant recipient. I worked my way through all four years, averaging 30-40 hours a week at whatever job or jobs I held, and took maximum credits for nearly every semester of school. During my time, I experienced how class affects relationships, opportunity, and my place within higher education.

When writing this autoethnography, I relied solely on memory and reflection. I began by creating a timeline spanning my freshman year to senior year, and pinpointed the most memorable experiences I had relating to my status as a low income students. From this timeline, I chose only those which had been the most pivotal in my development, and which I remembered the details of most reliably.

Freshman Year, Fall Semester

When I began university, I quickly found that my experiences growing up were not exactly typical. Most of my friends had not worked any job before, and only a couple were currently working at jobs while at college like me. It was during my very first semester that I got a taste of how sensitive the topic of class could be, whether someone was from the lower class, middle class, or upper class. It was during a simple discussion of high school jobs that I first came across a phenomenon I have experienced countless times since, class privilege ignorance.

I was chatting with a friend's boyfriend when I mentioned how I worked a job in high school because I had to have one. The boy jumped on my statement, asserting that he too had to have a job in high school, probably in some attempt to bond with me. When I asked him why he

had to have one, he proudly informed me that his parents required all their children to have a part time job in high school to teach them responsibility, and had to work, “at least 10 hours a week.” I was confused and a bit stunned. This did not fit my definition of “had to”.

“That’s not really what I meant when I said I had to have a job,” I explained, “I had to have a job because that was the only way I would have any money, and I sometimes helped my parents to pay bills.” He was immediately offended, asserting to me that he was in the exact same situation, because his parents made him have a job. “Had to is had to,” he kept repeating.

Later that year I found out he lived in a half million dollar house, and his parents paid his rent and gave him a monthly allowance for staying in school. He still asserted he understood my situation. He would be the first to do this, but not the last.

Junior Year, Spring Semester

In the second semester of my junior year in college I took a class on finance that was required core curriculum for one of my majors. Although the actual logistics of the class, essentially memorizing and reciting basic accounting formulas, did not excite me- I was thrilled to finally be receiving some kind of formal education on a topic which had been so influential in my own life; money.

I knew quickly that something was wrong in this finance class. It was in the third class of the semester that I first felt a wave of panic, starting from my heart and radiating out to every inch of my body- tears actually welling in my eyes. As I watched this professor write on the board and lecture conservative economic principles at all of us, I felt like I had somehow caught dyslexia and had a stroke at the same time. I understood nothing, these terms were all things I had never heard of. I spent a month in that class wondering what had gone wrong so quickly,

perhaps I didn't take a prerequisite class that I should have or maybe everyone else was having just as much trouble. Neither of those would turn out to be the case. It wasn't until some time after that first month mark that I realized what was happening. After finishing up one chapter and moving onto the next, the professor was interrupted by a student asking if we were skipping the chapter focusing specifically on stocks.

"Yes," he replied, "If you want to learn more about stocks, just ask your parents."

I wasn't having a stroke, and I didn't suddenly develop dyslexia. I just didn't come from money, and even though I probably worked more and earned more of my own money than any other student in that classroom- most had 20+ more years of experience having access to money. More money than I had ever had, maybe would ever had. Things quickly began falling into place pretty well after that, as I began listening to the things the professor was saying in between the actual content of his lectures. He loved to take on complicated and polarizing social issues, and very quickly spout out a simplified conservative view on the matter from a solely economic viewpoint. He'd do this so quickly, then move on that I think most people hardly noticed or hardly cared. Some examples include; immigration was simply bad for the U.S. economy, and as a result, so were immigrants; or that college shouldn't be paid for by the government because he didn't want his tax dollars going to "useless" arts and humanities degrees.

By the end of the semester, the panic hadn't stopped coming when I was in class, but it was now often accompanied by slow boiling rage in my gut. It stopped me from asking questions or seeking help, as every time I went to open my mouth I felt like I would cry or scream in my frustration. I was barely receiving a C in the class, the worst grade I had ever gotten in college. I would have considered dropping the class and taking it in the summer from another professor, if

it wouldn't have been for this professor's constant teasing to the class that those who weren't doing well should just drop out of the class, and then drop out of college. I may not have inherited wealth from my parents, but they both passed down an "I'll show them" nature that made me rich in stubbornness.

So towards the end of the semester, when I had missed a small online assignment, worth few, but by now very precious, points- I decided to replace my pride with my obstinate desire to pass this class, and scheduled a meeting after class with my professor. His topic for ranting of the day was minimum wage. If anything, he believed, the minimum wage should be lowered. Those of my classmates dressed in designer brands, who I imagined only worked for their mother's and father's businesses in the summers making double minimum wage through sheer nepotism, nodded solemnly in agreement. Class ended, I walked to my professors office and waited for him to arrive. He was chipper and friendly from the moment he showed up, as though he didn't spend nearly every class instructing students such as myself to just quit school and give up.

I explained to him that I had missed the deadline for the assignment as I had been working, and wanted to know if I could get an extension on the deadline. I bargained with him, telling him I wouldn't mind taking half points since I took full responsibility that I should have planned better and gotten the assignment done before my shift.

"Or," he spoke playfully, "You should prioritize school over work."

For the first time I had been in his presence, that gnawing feeling of panic and anxiety disappeared, giving way to only the anger. He smiled at me, and logged into his computer to check the assignment submission pages for the one I had missed.

“It’s a bit hard,” I say, not an ounce of nervousness in my voice, “I prioritize both, but I also work 35-40 hours a week so it’s not easy.”

This is the first time I see him without the cocky smile and quick witted retort. He stops scrolling, and looks up from his computer screen, “Why,” he asks with a genuinely puzzled expression on his face, “on earth do you work 35-40 hours a week as a full time student?”

In my daydreams I had imagined this moment, this opportunity to rip him apart and put him in his place. I would tell him everything about myself, make him face not just the economic effects of the subjects he lectured on every day. I did not have the opportunities that other kids did, I would say. I cannot ask my parents about stocks they do not know a thing about them, I do not have connections to successful business owners that could give me well paying college jobs, I cannot afford to take on a full time no-payment internship to gain that experience, I do not have access to a parent’s Amex black card to put my textbooks on, I cannot go on a spring break trip, I don’t have the money and I can’t take that time off work, I have not been to my hometown in 6 months, I have to work, but all that comes out is,

“Somebody has to pay rent. And it’s me, and I have to work.”

He says nothing, but smiles at me, clicking buttons on his screen to reopen the assignment I have missed. I cannot help myself but to give back to him one of the witty retorts he always adds on to his rants,

“And boy,” I say, “it sure would help if I made more than minimum wage.”

His smile wavers for a moment, but only a moment. He turns back to me, and simply says, “I’ve reopened the assignment for another couple days. I’ll give you full points if you get it done.”

I'm sure he feels as though he's bought himself a ticket to heaven with such a good deed. I thank him, and leave. I go home, I change for work. I finish the assignment late that night, and I pass the class at the end of the semester. I have to, I cannot afford to be in school another half a year.

Senior Year, Spring Semester

Typically, I rarely bought textbooks during my time in college. I found, as many students do, that there were plenty of teachers that loved to assign them, never use them, and presumably make away like a bandit on kickbacks they received from a publisher for requiring their book. The one type of textbook that I always had to purchase however, were digital books that included assignment material that could only be completed online. These books enraged me, as even if we only had one assignment due from them, the only viable option was to purchase access to the digital book. You could not share, steal, or rent these books- you were stuck shelling out that money. Sometimes they made sense to assign for the class. Most of the time, they did not.

During my last semester of college, I had a class that took the cake on unnecessary textbook greed. I had a professor assign us learning materials that totaled over \$400 all together, and \$350 of that were digital textbooks or programs that could not be rented, borrowed, or found for cheaper options. When the professor told the class this, she didn't even bat an eye, and neither did the rest of my classmates. The only objection I heard was a nearby classmate whisper under her breath, "Great, now I'll have to call my mom for her credit card."

I felt like I was going to throw up at the thought of having to come up with that money. I seemed to be the only one. At this point I wasn't surprised at the difference in my reaction and my classmates. I ended up putting it all on my own credit card to give myself more time, and

working extra hours to pay that off at the end of the month. I do not feel like these products helped me learn, gave me an advantage, or served as anything more than another professor getting the opportunity to pat themselves on the back for implementing new features into their classroom. I wonder, how often had I suffered already, and would suffer in the future, for so little reason?

Conclusion

Though low income students face plenty of hardships, one of the worst for me was the class boundaries I felt in even my day to day interactions between both peers and professors or faculty. I don't know how to fix classism, or how to teach those around me empathy. I do know that the loneliness and isolation I faced as a low income student was something that could have been avoided. Further research must be completed on how low income students present their status, and how these students can find each other without stitching a scarlet letter to their chest.

I hope that this paper, and my autoethnography, creates some level of visibility for low income students. It is a resource now that I myself did not have access to, but it is far from perfect. A step in the right direction, but a long road ahead.

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